



Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management

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DEM ADVISES PET OWNERS NOT TO LET THEIR DOGS MINGLE WITH OTHER DOGS UNTIL RESPIRATORY DISEASE IS IDENTIFIED

PROVIDENCE, RI – The Department of Environmental Management (DEM) is advising Rhode Island dog owners not to let their pets mingle with other dogs until veterinarians and epidemiologists have identified an unknown but highly contagious respiratory disease that causes more severe illness and carries higher resistance to antibiotics than typical respiratory infections. Although hundreds of seemingly similar cases have emerged nationwide, no one knows if it is a new disease or a worse version of an existing disease, or if the cases are related.

“The Rhode Island Veterinary Medical Association (RIVMA) was made aware of this atypical respiratory syndrome in early 2023 and our veterinarians began sharing data with (State Veterinarian) Dr. Marshall,” said RIVMA President Shelly Pancoast DVM. “Ocean State Veterinary Services, the largest animal hospital in the state, has been sharing swab samples from affected dogs with the lab at the University of New Hampshire while they collect data to try to further characterize this disease. Based on our internal data, we feel that most dogs that develop pneumonia and require hospitalization will make a full recovery, and a very small number of dogs are passing away from this disease.”



Listen up, dog owners!

“The only common thread is that all cases appear to have an association with dogs recently commingling with other dogs in congregate settings such as at dog parks, shelters, groomers, kennels, or a dog trainer,” said State Veterinarian Scott Marshall DVM. “In the same way that people spread germs and illnesses by interacting with other people, dogs transmit disease when congregating with other dogs. For this reason, and particularly until the agent causing the illness is known, we are recommending that dog owners avoid needless risks of exposure.”

This means not bringing pets to the neighborhood dog park, where many germs are spread, or into stores where pets are allowed. Understanding that some pet owners may need to kennel their dogs for work or travel, DEM is advising them to make sure to consult their veterinarians beforehand to confirm their dogs are properly vaccinated. Also, DEM is advising indoor facilities such as pounds, shelters, rescues, kennels, groomers, doggy daycare centers, and pet shops to consult with their veterinarian to discuss proper cleaning and disinfection procedures in these congregate settings.

Dr. Marshall is aware of around 35 Rhode Island cases of the mystery disease, thanks to veterinarians contacting his office and reporting the signs of illness they have seen in dogs in their care – which is a step they're not required to take. Rhode Island has disease reporting regulations that require the reporting of two respiratory viruses found in dogs: canine distemper and canine influenza. However, because this undiagnosed disease hasn't been linked with a specific cause, state regulations are likely insufficient to require reporting. Veterinarians did so anyway.

"Some veterinarians called to report that what initially presented as kennel cough, which is a nonspecific diagnosis of a mild upper respiratory infection that's either bacterial or viral or sometimes mixed, actually was more severe than they would expect," Dr. Marshall said. "Because we haven't identified a cause and based on what I'm hearing from colleagues in other states, I believe this disease is being highly underreported."

"[Signs] of infection in dogs include a cough that can linger for several weeks, runny eyes, and sneezing," states the website of the New Hampshire Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory, which is serving as a clearinghouse for New England states with dogs showing signs of the illness. "A very small subset of dogs has died after a long bout of this illness that is then complicated or superimposed with severe acute pneumonia."

Rhode Island is one of at least 10 states to have reported cases. At this point, evidence suggests that the infection has been limited to dogs. There have not been reports of people or other animals, like cats, being sickened.

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